



The Tribal World and The Imagination of the Future¹



Social scientists make poor story tellers. They get absorbed in the objectivity of roles and institutions and are also unable to handle the nuances of repetition and redundancy mistaking it for cliché. Yet social scientists must tell stories.

This essay is a variant of one called social science fiction. It is a story that begins in parallel time.

On November 9th 1947, negotiations between the tribal communities of Chota Nagpur and the Indian government had broken down. The Indian army under General Cariappa was worried, its focus already under strain with the joint tensions of Kashmir and Hyderabad. Only Sardar Patel was cool. He said ‘we don’t fight the tribals. These people fought wars of independence years before 1847. They are the original nationalists.’

Patel’s sentiment had the idea that these tribals wanted a nation without the nation-state. They loved the idea of Gandhi as father of the nation but they would not accept the idea of the nation-state which was anathema. For India the problem of the constituent assembly had become a fractured dialogue confronting a divided nation. The first division was the silence of the partition, the absence of the Muslim League in the making of the Indian state. But the second break was the one that perplexed Patel, Nehru and Azad

¹This essay owes much to conversations with Chandrika Parmar and to the writings of anthropologists from Clastres to Levi Strauss, even Verrier Elwin. I would also like to thank John Hutnyk for his library, tea and hospitality while writing this essay.



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was the recalcitrance of the tribes. It was not just the claim that they were autochthonous, more original and native to India. It was not the argument that now that freedom was coming, the Indians as conquerors should leave like the British were leaving with their baggage of modernity, isms and the Janus gift of progress. Two outsiders being shown the exit door was high drama, but as comedy. For the tribals while the British hegemony was tragedy, Indian democracy would be a farce. Neutral observers cringed at this fatal use of Marx.

Nehru and Sardar were clear. The tribals were not *razakars*. Their culture was different. Their plea was different. Their world and their arguments was an appeal to a different imagination. The tribals the leaders felt they had to be talked to. Sorry in the more dialogic language of democracy, they had to be talked *with*. A change of *prepositions* was becoming a change of *propositions*. Grammar was the first signal of change, language, the first semiotics of freedom.

While the call for dialogue was in the air, there were a few violent skirmishes. A few criminal/ denotified tribals were lynched in public. Two young boys were tortured to death. The osmosis of power was clear. British or Indian, tribes were to be the cannon fodder of the emerging state. The criminal justice system was irrelevant to them. Of course witnesses in official time would laugh cynically. The Indian state was still feeble, still hesitant. It had yet to offer its great contribution, the drama of encounter deaths to the world. Encounter. Let me tell the reader was not dialogic idea which summoned a Buber or Gandhi. Encounter was an asymmetric event, a zero sum game where any random tribal was shot dead because he was seen as guilty by being. The Indian police in later years would add their own privatized twist to it by creating a perverse system of accounting. They would file for excess ammunition and sell it off to the arms market.

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Despite the violence the tribal leaders held their peace. They wanted their world along our world. They wanted to be separate, equal and reciprocal. The Gandhians and socialists were the most perplexed. Jaipal Singh one of the leaders tried to explain. He asked them to recollect the early days of the constituent assembly when the groups were discussing the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP). He reminded them of the discussion on prohibition, the states right to prohibit alcohol. Singh reminded them that at that time he had said he could not think of tribes without their wine. He recollected how the Gandhians had reprimanded him. When he had said a tribals drink was a part of his being, his identity, his festivals, his celebrations of life, the Gandhians had turned preachy, saying it violated the precepts of the master turning tribals into a social work problem. Singh laughed and said the missionaries never left or when they left, they left behind the Trojan horse called social work. He asked them to look at the violence of social work, where some group is always defined as problematic, unreformable, and refractory to the state. Social work problematizes the tribal as alcoholic even before he accepts the state.

Nehru summoned Jaipal Singh, Ram Dayal Munda and other leaders to Delhi. The men from Chotanagpur spent their day with their old Christian friend JC Kumarappa. The acerbic Gandhian welcomed them and proceeded to quarrel with Nehru and Singh. Late next day he drove them in a *Tanga* from the locality of Paharganj to Parliament. There was a commotion near India Gate. The army held up the *tanga* saying it was not allowed on public roads. Kumarappa argued that the army could not decide what was public. The guests watched curiously wondering if the viceroy's horse had similar problems. Eventually a phone call from Nehru cleared the controversy and the dissidents made their regal way to Parliament offices.

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The two teams met and Nehru talked about history, the new tryst with destiny. He felt at ease. Singh was also as Cambridge don, a hockey blue. Singh listened and told Nehru he did not believe in history. He asked Nehru whether he had heard of the new word which had just been invented by President Truman. He called it *development*. An innocuous word, colourless, odourless like most poisons and equally lethal. Munda warned him that development would claim more victims than any religion, any dogma. Nehru was distracted and wondered what he was talking about it. Only Kumarappa stood still as if he had seen a new horseman of apocalypse. The two groups decided to meet over the next few weeks to talk things over. Nehru and Patel were clear they could not think of an India without tribes. The tribal team agreed wholeheartedly.

The following report of the discussion was found in the Kumarappa papers. It came to light only in 2005, when two young researchers, diasporic Indians from Washington University obtained a fellowship for a biography of the man. The report is constructed on the basis of Kumarappa minutes. The report is a bit secretive as to names occasionally using initials, which were a trifle confusing. The debates of ideas, the politics is starkly there but the gossipy richness of who said what to whom is occasionally lost.

The meeting with the Chota nagpur five were held in Teen Murti Bhavan, then home of Jawahar lal. The meeting was attended by Sarojini Naidu, Abul Kalam Azad, Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Nehru and Patel. Benegal Rau ICS was secretary and rapporteur. A British anthropologist, a certain V. Elwin also informally attended some sessions of the meeting.

The meeting broke into a furore even before the terms of the discussions could be elaborated. The unfortunate event that led to



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the confusion was the word secessionist. Mrs Naidu use of the term secessionist was objected to. The Chotanagpur five not only objected to the use of the term but what they claimed was the misunderstandings it created. Secession, they felt, was an unfortunate term. Secession was the key word in a political discourse and it unfortunately assumed the baggage of state discourse, of passports, nationality, boundaries, borders and security. Oddly, it was Mr. Elwin who grasped it with a typical understatement. He explained to Mrs. Naidu 'Our Munda friend is not talking politics. He is talking as kinsmen. When families mature or when a young man decides to marry, he takes a new home close to his old one. The new house is different from but connected with the old home. Segmentation would be the more appropriate word. Only now the older home is demanding a distance from the new.'

One of the five, Dr. Raphael Horo, himself part of the new Ranchi Institute of Research agreed vigorously. But Singh intervened to add 'yes it is a kinship term. We are kinsmen. But there is a politics to it. One has to redefine secession separately. It is not just the physical movement of a group away from the ruler. In that sense India was always full of secessions, full of million quarrels or mutinies. Villagers used to move away from the ruler whenever he turned oppressive. In many cases the ruler sent a messenger beseeching his subjects to come back and they did.' (Elwin notes in his diary that Patel grunted at this movement).

The Chotanagpur five argued that Indian democracy would always have to be fluid or different. It was not a stock of collectivities but a flow of people. In India, citizenship belongs not just to a domesticated middle class but its millions of nomads, its pastoral groups, its tribals who were not part of the constituent assembly and probably never heard of it. Their way of life, their taxonomies defied the nation- state. India could only be India if yesterday's secessionist was today's citizen. It was a cycle of life, lifestyle, of

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livelihood that transcended the current ideas of politics. Modern politics hovers between taxonomy and taxidermy. Either way it wants to pin you down. Benegal Rau remembering his revered Laski and Dudley Stamp blurted that this challenged the current ideas of place and space. Elwin brushed it aside by commenting a nomad carries his place with him, But a tribal leader emphasized there was more to it.

Dr. Horo chuckled quizzically. He explained to Elwin that it is not anthropology you need but science fiction. Quoting Margaret Mead, the young Columbia university anthropologist explained that what anthropology invents of the past, science fiction does the same for the future. It is the anthropology of the future, a visionary science which would be taught in a post-colonial age. The structure of India is such that it needs renewal and dynamism. People seceding and returning will be a cycle of political seasons. “Our new Ranchi Institute survey projects that by the 1980’s at least 20-30 million Indians and not just tribals would be seceding in some form or other.”

Nehru snapped abruptly saying, “enough of H.G. Wells and Verne.” Munda replied, “Wells as a novelist was a fertile imagination. It was Wells as a Fabian who went dead politically.”

An uneasy silence followed. Rau notes in his minutes that Nehru was wondering whether it was Columbia University rather than LSE he should be worrying about. Columbia produced Kumarappa, Ambedkar, and now Horo. This lot unlike the Laski troupe were more unpredictably political. Nehru added that when he told Horo that SF was not even literature, Horo is said to have replied “you have to think beyond Leavis. SF is bad text trying to capture the oral nature of storytelling. As archive, it is miserable, as conversation and dream exquisite.”

Kumarappa in his minutes notes that Patel listening to all these

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asides was getting impatient. He turned to Jaipal Singh and said “all this is meaningless. We are not debating a syllabus, we are discussing a constitution. Constitutionally what you are suggesting is not possible” Patel insisted. “Our preamble is non- negotiable. Our nation, our socialism is not negotiable. Our sovereignty is non-negotiable. Our borders are non- negotiable. This is not a seminar or a *haat*. It is about our country you are talking about”.

Singh nodded sadly realizing when push comes to the shove “tribals were not yet Indians. Only potential Indians, problematic Indians, primitive Indians but never Indians per se. India like Brahmanism needs twice borns not twice aborted” Both groups realized that positions were polarized and old wounds had surfaced. Mrs Naidu proposed the group meet early tomorrow. That was the only item of consensus that day.

The next day began warmly like old friends reuniting over tea. Yet the mood shifted oddly within a few minutes when Raphael Horo asked “what about the third secession?”

Pandit ji exploded. “There has been no other act of secession. Partition is not secession. Yours is the only event of secession.” Jaipal Singh immediately agreed that the question of Partition was different from the tribal debate. But then added quietly, “what about CPR?”

It was Patel who answered. “Travancore did not secede. C. P Ramaswami pledged total loyalty to India. CPR is not the Nizam. He is totally Indian”

It was one of the five who intervened. His name is not mentioned. He said “what if?” There was an incredulous silence. He said “what if Kerala had seceded for reasons of environment? What if ecology demanded that Kerala secede but allow its citizens to migrate and work in India? Would India or Kerala have lost anything? With its

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land reform, its openness to women, its social movements for temple reform, it might be an alternative model to India.” Patel dismissed the Marxists as a bunch of Brahmin boys. Munda noted that the original description was Ambedkars. Then Jaipal Singh began one of his longer speeches. He looked only at Nehru and Patel. He said “there is little you are offering us. The constitution is yours. The borders are yours. The sovereignty is yours. The flag is yours. What is ours? What is that is both tribal and Indian in the constitution? What is the shared legacy, the common weave? You have defined rights, the isms, the industry, the science, let something be ours.” It was then that Nehru proposed that maybe Singh could define Directive Principles of State Policy. Singh added wryly, “ Ah the non justiciable part”. Nehru added “It is the vision of the future”. Munda said he liked the irony, “your past as your future, our anthropology now as your science fiction” Over the next two days the tribals wrote or itemized the dreams of the future into the Directive Principles of State Policy.

The Kumarappa diaries mention that the debates around the DPSP became one of the most vibrant dialogues about the future of India. What stuck him most was that tribals as an interest group did not begin with their sense of victim hood, of wrongs to be righted, but of democracy as a fundamental question.

The Kumarappa report indicates that the Chotanagpur five were excited by the prospects of the exercise and adds that their discussions provided one of the most interesting chapters of the new constituent assembly debates. As Raphael Horo said later “It is only when anthropology confronts science fiction or when primitivism meets robotics that the basic assumptions of a society begin to reveal themselves.” One also understands the difference between pre-emptive futures captive to old isms and the preferred futures, the



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song lines of freedom. What remains today is the preamble the group wrote to the Directive Principles.

The DPSP they argued was a gyroscope for the future, a sociological litmus test, an early warning system telling you whether the directions make sense. Horo its principal author began by contending “A constitution is a symbol of homecoming. It enfranchises all those made homeless, made helpless by old laws. It is an invitation to the marginal, the vulnerable, the outlaw, the dissenters to experience the constitution as a dwelling, a place for multiple beings and becomings. The future is only a possibility for citizenship.”

The paradox of the Indian constitution is that disenfranchises thrice. It disenfranchises, outlaws and negates the tribe. Its ideas of sovereignty, its notion of the eminent domain assures the tribal or the peasant has no access to the forest. He has no access to his resources or a theatre for his cosmology. His food, his medicines, his play all came from the forest but forest is no longer a commons. The drama of common access and common maintenance is now over. It is the ultimate paradox of anthropology where the native becomes outlaw in his own land. We face the paradox of a constitution that criminalizes its own citizens.

Munda notes added that the disenfranchisement of the marginal tribal peasant was hidden in the abstractness and alleged universalism of the constitution. A constitution that floats in abstract time is genocidal. Worse it has no memory of its own executions as it fails to record the logic of its own erasures. The group feels that all constitutions that float in abstract time are cosmically homeless. A constitution must embody multiple time- the time of the nomad, the seasonal time of pastoral groups, the time of agriculture and women’s time. The DPSP is a ganglion of times that connects to official constitution based on clock time. Clock time for the constitution is both empty and necrophilic.



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The ecological embedding of the constitution needs not only an embedding in time but in the life-worlds of its people. A constitution can't only deal with life in the abstract as a system. It has to connect life, life world, life cycle, livelihood, lifestyle to the life chances of the people. To speak of electricity and nuclear power in the world of the forest is lethally paradoxical.

A constitution cannot tacitly speak the language of an official science. If every citizen is a man of knowledge, then the constitution must be a referendum of multiple knowledges. The citizen is not an object of science. Instead, every man must be seen as a scientist, every village a science academy.

To officialize western science is to pre-empt a future. It privileges the synthetic fertilizer over the earthworm and all the other organisms that make life possible. It is a constitution that privileges taxidermy over life. We understand the dreams of science but we demand it understands other forms of knowledge not in the museum or the laboratory but in the domain of life.

Given the gigantic technological projects emerging around roads, factories, dams, the old panchayat of consensus and participation is not adequate. We need a new concept that brings the tribe, the policeman, the healer, the shamam, the doctor, the psychiatrist, the vaid and the hakim into a conversation of knowledges. But a mere dialogue is not enough. We suggest the new concept of cognitive justice, the right of different knowledges to co-exist and thrive together. Medical policy then must reflect the grammar of these different notions of suffering, health and healing. The pluralism of ecological, medical, agricultural systems may not survive without cognitive justice.

A technological project is not an act of innocence. But it needs a new democracy of vigilance. We propose:

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1. That human rights teams be attached to every project
2. That every project be subject to rules of transparency
3. That the methodology of doubt and scepticism that science made famous be applied to every project beginning with DVC
4. That each project be subject to referendum and occasional recall
5. That the language of evaluation should be also in the language of subjects, their notions of memory, their ideas of well being, their sense of fairness.

The Kumarappa documents end with this fragment. Legend has it that there was a longer extract focussing on the everydayness of culture, politics and technology. When the documents came up for discussion, the beginning of the end was clear. The Gandhians and socialists and the Marxists treated it with contempt. The document lacked the Linus blanket of progress. It appeared like a letter from another world.

Both Nehru and Sardar were too preoccupied with the partition. Sardar had become more Bismarckian than ever refusing any negotiation on the nation- state “We need a copy book nation. If I allow you the freedom to experiment the whole of the north east would go on fire”. Nehru struck a different chord echoing the other half of Sardar’s mind. He said “The partition has been too traumatic. Over one million people dead and 16 million people displaced. We need time to heal” he begged. The rest of sympathised but Horo blurted “one day you will create more refugees from your dam projects. DVC will be an epidemic”. But there was a sense of defeat on both sides. Both realized they had been upstaged by history with capital H. The legal expert Rafael Lemkin had just coined the word Genocide to refer to the holocaust. Partition everyone realized

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could be the invisible Holocaust.

The meeting broke down soon after. Nehru and Sardar had joined the costume ball of the state. Governance had its dramas which are demanding. Jaipal Singh and Munda returned to wait as Nehru advised. But the opportunity never came. Sometimes tragedy is a drama whose time never comes. All it leaves is the salty stale bitter taste of irony of a forgotten people.

Of the Chotanagpur five only one remains alive, Raphael Horo. He left soon after the meetings for a small college town in USA to teach anthropology. Horo had built a tremendous reputation as a linguist. His dictionaries were standard work.

I bumped into him at a conference. He sensed my presence deftly moving away, foiling my first attempts at meeting him. I ambushed him over coffee one afternoon and asked him about his reflections. There was no bitterness in what he said. It was almost as if history was a trickster from whom we must learn. “Independence was a time for hope. We were like kids at Christmas, each leaving his socks out hoping for his own version of freedom. I guess we realize independence is not freedom. It is like space and place. Independence is like space. It is official. Freedom is a place it needs to be built again and again” He paused and suddenly asked “have you been to Jamshedpur the home of Tata Steel. I used to watch the Dalma hills where my tribe used to practice Jhum, setting fire to the forest. It was a stupendous almost mythical blaze. On one side of the hills you could see the forest on fire and on the other the Tata factories pouring slag down their huge factory mounds. Two fires, two modes of creativity and for a while I thought they were balanced. After all there was the kinship of iron and steel within us”

“It did not work” There was a silence, a thoughtful one as if Horo was collecting the right words “It was a victory of stereotypes.



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The government read us as a bundle of complaints, a trade union of tribal rights and interests but we were not interested in being interest groups or foisting victimology. We wanted to join the festival called freedom, offer our ideas, our philosophies, our vision of India, but we had already been museumized or criminalized. We went as philosophers and were dismissed as savages.”

“Have you read the Brundlandt report? It is supposed to be on sustainable development, on energy. It is bowdlerized idiocy. There is more sustainability in Jhum, in shifting cultivation than in the entire report. If Brundtland is the Charles Lamb, Shifting cultivation is a Shakespearian drama of sustainability”

He laughed and shrugged. “Take Care”, he said.

I never met him again.

Shiv Visvanathan